

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing on
Defending Prisoners of Conscience**

February 15, 2018

Testimony of Melina Milazzo, Washington Director, Freedom Now

Thank you Chairman Hultgren, Ranking Member McGovern, and all members of the Commission for convening this hearing today. We appreciate your efforts to bring greater exposure to this important initiative.

My name is Melina Milazzo and I am the Washington Director for Freedom Now, a legal advocacy organization that works to promote respect for human rights and the rule of law worldwide by helping to free prisoners of conscience and address arbitrary detention.

We work to achieve this objective by a strategic blend of international legal, political and public relations advocacy efforts. This includes *pro bono* international legal representation of prisoners of conscience on an individual basis and international advocacy initiatives tackling repressive laws, fair trial rights, and associated violations of human rights.

Prisoners of conscience are individuals who have been imprisoned as punishment for their nonviolent exercise of a fundamental right, such as expression or belief, political association or participation in a public demonstration. These courageous individuals dare to speak their minds, engage in independent journalism, organize against corrupt government practices, and seek to practice their religious beliefs independent from government control. In turn, authoritarian governments retaliate, subjecting them to politically motivated trials where the rule of law is ignored and the outcome is predetermined. The legal assistance we provide before international bodies is often a prisoner of conscience's only chance to hold their government accountable.

Once these individuals are freed they can return to their communities and continue their work to protect human rights and root out corruption. Some of our clients have been part of the Defending Freedoms Project, including Vietnamese democracy activist Father Nguyen Van Ly and Mauritanian anti-slavery activist Biram Dah Abeid, who was awarded the U.S. State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report Heroes Award in 2016.

There is no doubt that the Defending Freedoms Project has had a noticeable impact on a number of prisoner of conscience cases around the world, but there are some countries that need more attention. One such country is Azerbaijan. Since 2014, the government of Azerbaijan has overseen a large-scale crackdown on civil society in the country, imprisoning at last count 160 individuals. Some of these individuals include prisoners who have been detained for several years, such as political opposition leader Ilgar Mammadov, youth activist Ilkin Rustamzadeh, and journalist Seymur Hezi. Others have been arrested more recently, such as youth activists Bayram Mammadov and Giyas Ibrahimov or journalist Afgan Mukhtarli.

We have seen the Azerbaijani government respond to pressure from the U.S. Congress before, such as when it released journalist Mehman Aliyev in November 2017 after Senator Durbin introduced an amendment withholding U.S. State Department funding from Azerbaijan as long as Mehman remained in prison. However, we need more Congressional voices to speak for the many individuals Azerbaijan has silenced. We hope you will consider adopting a prisoner from this country and be their voice.

Thank you.